

Getting Started with Your Xeriscape

What is xeriscape?

“Zero-scapes”. Doesn’t that mean covering your yard with cactus and rocks? And the word is pronounced “*ze ri scape*.”

Many people have the wrong idea about xeriscapes. Actually the word *xeriscape* comes from the Greek word *xeros*, which means “dry.” A xeriscape conserves water and energy through creative landscaping. Ultimately it means money in your pocket and less time spent in the yard. Xeriscaping is based on seven principles:

1. Develop a good landscape design
2. Reduce the amount of lawn
3. Use water efficiently
4. Improve your soil
5. Mulch bare ground
6. Choose plants that don’t use much water
7. Practice good maintenance

Why xeriscape?

Right now is a good time to think about xeriscaping your yard for several reasons. During an average summer here in South Texas, your water bills usually rise with the temperature. In addition, you may be tired of mowing and edging that lawn every week. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a good-looking yard without paying an outrageous water bill and spending hours doing lawn maintenance? Xeriscape can help you achieve those goals.

Which Plants Thrive in Your Neighbors’ Yards?

When the weather was so hot last summer, did you look around at your neighbors’ yards to see which plants were growing and blooming, not just surviving? If you liked the way those plants looked, find out their names because you will probably want to use them in your yard. If you didn’t take notice last year, do so this year. Take pictures so that you can remember what the plants look like. If you can’t find out a plant’s name, take the picture to your local nursery (not a big box store) and the people there can probably identify it for you.

What Style?

Check out Watersaver Lane at the San Antonio Botanic Gardens. You will notice that a xeriscape can be as formal or informal as you want it. There is not a single look. Choose the style you like the best.

What Do You Want? Or Need?

Step back and take a hard look at your landscape. *Dream* a little. Think about your yard as if it had different rooms. Where would you like a relaxing room, or the family room, or a work area? Then decide how you want to *create your “rooms”*—where will you create a large flowerbed, or a hardscape, or plant a ground cover to get rid of much of that grass. If you have *children or pets*, don’t forget a play area—you probably want to leave grass

there. Use your *garden hose or a long piece of heavy rope* to lay out the boundaries of the proposed bed or beds and take a look. Use *curving lines* for your beds to imitate nature—you won't find square lines there! Imagine your beds filled with healthy native plants that *like* our climate and *want* to grow.

Benefits of Xeriscape

Believe it or not, a large flowerbed planted with native or adapted shrubs, perennials, and annuals that are mulched needs **much less** care than grass. So does a groundcover other than turf grass. Perhaps you want to cut down on your electric bill by planting a tree to shade the east or west side of your house. Do you know which trees are the best for our area? Did you know that if you put a mulched flowerbed around your tree and eliminated those competing grass roots, it would grow faster?

Make Hardscape Your Friend!

Remember that you can eliminate grass with hardscape as well as flowerbeds. Nice curving walkways made from pavers or mulch are an attractive addition to a garden. So is a patio or a sitting area with a swing under a shade tree. A water permeable hardscape is the best to use in your xeriscape. Use pavers, bricks, flat rocks, crushed granite, river rock, or coarse mulch for your cover instead of a concrete slab or mortared bricks or rock. That allows water to soak into the ground and not become runoff. This kind of project is one best done during the cooler times of the year. July and August can be killers, literally.

Draw Up a Plan and Implement It as You Can

After you have your overall plan sketched out, choose the area you want to do first. Then begin to do the project just like you would eat an elephant—one bite at a time! This isn't like painting where you need to finish an entire room or risk problems. It's okay to do a little as you have time and strength. Just continue to chip away at the total plan.

Timing and Care of a New Landscape

New plants of any kind need to be watered until they have established their roots sufficiently to take care of themselves. For trees, shrubs, and many perennials that means about a year of care. The best time to plant trees, shrubs, and perennials is from mid-September to May because of the heat. When temperatures begin reaching the mid-90s on a daily basis, plants will struggle if their root systems aren't large enough. As a result, new plants planted during the brutal heat of summer will require more water and attention than those planted when conditions are milder. So save yourself the time, water, and possible cost of replacing plants that don't make it by planting early or late.

Celebrate Your Accomplishment!

Above all, enjoy yourself! Celebrate the progress you make toward your goal of a xeriscaped yard. Take before and after pictures to remind yourself of how much you've accomplished. Sit back and appreciate the change(s) you have made. *Life is good!*